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# In Search of the Ooey Gooey Good

Lauren Ashley Clay

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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IN SEARCH OF THE OOEY GOOEY GOOD

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By Lauren Clay

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# Abstract

## IN SEARCH OF THE OOEY GOOEY GOOD

By Lauren Ashley Clay, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007

Major Director: Peter Baldes  
Assistant Professor, Painting and Printmaking

This thesis explores ideas of everydayness, the mundane, and the repetitive emptiness of consumer culture. It looks at the malaise that plagues everyday life and examines several attempts throughout history to break from its grips which revolve around a search for a more ideal state. This research includes utopias of modernism, the transcendental, the communal living of Shakers and Early Christians, ascetic monks and The Desert Fathers. These ideas have shaped my studio practice as I construct installations based on worlds which allude to the eternal, the otherworldly, and the fragility of our physical world when compared to more eternal spiritual archetypes.

## Introduction

*The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life... To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.*  
Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*<sup>1</sup>

I grew up in Alpharetta, Georgia, a town typical in everyway of the suburban towns that sprawl out all across America. I survived elementary school in this safe, middle class, white, suburban landscape, and stuck it out through middle school and high-school. Throughout my childhood I could feel the subtle, oppressive nature of our suburban culture: the routine, the uniformity, the ordinary, the expected. And I fought to shrug it off, because every fiber of me knew that there was something more to life than cul-de-sacs, chain restaurants, swimming lessons, Sunday school and strip malls. I fought to shrug it off by altering whatever came into my hands, whatever I was given control of, to escape from the mundane. In high school I made my own clothes, sequestered myself in the art department, I avoided P.E., football games and cheerleaders at all costs, avoided all teenage magazines marketed for girls my age, and drove a green 1972 Volkswagen Super Beetle while the other kids drove Mustangs and Jeep Cherokees. It was not that my choices were essentially *better*, but they were *different*. And *different*-ness was what I was aiming for. Granted, some of this reaction was based in teenage rebellion, but also I believe I was realizing that every aspect of my life was a decision I could make for myself and I was not restricted by the expected norm.

When I moved to Savannah, Georgia in 2000 to go to college, and I was surrounded by the seediness and dirty charm of the old south, I finally found myself living

a life that felt unique. It was a feeling similar to what Walker Percy would describe as a *someone somewhere*, rather than an *anyone anywhere*<sup>2</sup>. It was the Spanish moss, oak trees and iron fences, the painted ladies, the ghetto, where actual crime took place, the diversity of my neighbors, and the environment that seduced me and drew me into the *placeness* of the city itself. Life in Savannah caused some of my first realizations about how place affects us. This idea would later ingrain itself deeper in me after reading Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, where ideas of suburban ennui, desperation, and placeness are plotted out in ways that I was already very familiar with. The world is too interesting and its people too diverse and beautiful for us to let ourselves become numb to them. As the conceptual aspect of my studio practice has developed, I have become more and more interested in ideas of everydayness and of attempts throughout history to break from its grips.

Because my understanding of everydayness has been primarily formed by my experiences and observations while living in the suburbs, this aspect of my research will focus primarily on ways that everydayness exists in that kind of environment, although it is a feeling I've wrestled with in every place I've lived.

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<sup>1</sup> Walker Percy. *The Moviegoer*. (Vintage Books, Random House Inc., New York, 1960) 13.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 63.

## Chapter 1:

### Everydayness: The Modern Malaise

*"I am a model tenant and a model citizen and take pleasure in doing all that is expected of me. My wallet is full of identity cards, library cards, credit cards. Last year I purchased a flat olive-drab strongbox, very smooth and heavily built with double walls for fire protection, in which I placed my birth certificate, college diploma, honorable discharge, G.I. insurance, a few stock certificates, and my inheritance... It is a pleasure to carry out the duties of a citizen and to receive in return a receipt or a neat styrene card with one's name on it certifying so to speak, one's right to exist. What satisfaction I take in appearing the first day to get my auto tag and brake sticker! I subscribe to Consumer Reports and as a consequence I own a first-class television set, an all but silent air conditioner and a very long lasting deodorant. My armpits never stink. I pay attention to all spot announcements on the radio about mental health, the seven signs of cancer, and safe driving--- though, as I say, I usually prefer to ride the bus... In the evening I usually watch television or go to the movies. Weekends I often spend on the Gulf Coast. Our neighborhood theater in Gentilly has permanent lettering on the front of the marquee reading: Where Happiness Costs So Little."*  
*Walker Percy, The Moviegoer*<sup>3</sup>

Everydayness, which is to me epitomized in suburban culture, can be described as the mundane, and the ordinary. It is the state of being so entrenched in life's daily comings and goings, work and home-life, that nothing even remotely different can be seen on the horizon. Everydayness is the preoccupation with the basic human needs: shelter, clothing, and food. It revels in sameness, and distrusts anything unfamiliar or out of the ordinary. Everydayness is void of anything miraculous, transcendental, or magical. It is a state of



mind that one becomes *stuck* in. Because the quality of life for a person in the suburbs is very much similar to that of his or her neighbors, one also becomes oblivious to struggle or tragedy. Any interaction with tragedy is neatly filtered and confused with entertainment on the nightly news.

I think it is extremely ironic that the preplanned community I wanted to escape from as a teenager was replaced when I moved to college, by not just *another* preplanned community, but the *first* preplanned community in the United States. A map of Savannah was drawn by James Oglethorpe in 1770, with utopian idealistic fantasies before he had even left England. Three years later Savannah was founded on a patch of land occupied by Native Americans. The city was laid out in a symmetrical grid with residential areas surrounding 24 squares. Originally the squares were meeting places, wells, vegetable gardens and stockades, now they are well manicured parks marked with monuments and plaques.

In cities that already have a more established sense of *placeness*, like Savannah's Historic District, or the French Quarter in New Orleans, chains and brand stores are not tolerated because they are too familiar and would detract from the unique feel of the *place*. In the suburbs, however, people seem to seek out sameness. It is for this reason that I can walk into any Target store across the country and pretend that I am back in my hometown of Alpharetta, Georgia. Suburbanites seek out familiarity and they can now find it nation wide. In the suburbs, chain restaurants and strip-malls become meaningless islands in vast seas of parking lots, medians and traffic lights. The landscape is more dictated by the American's dependency on the automobile than it is on any vision for the future or for the uniqueness of the people or the place itself.

Preplanned communities leave no room for chance in some of the most important developmental stages of a place, but over time, after the luster wears off, diversity moves in. I see this happening in cities, but I wonder if it will ever happen in the suburbs. Savannah was like this. By the 1920s and 30s many of the historic southern row houses were converted into apartments for the working class families during the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 7.

industrial revolution. The old southern families still remained, staked out in the heart of the downtown and the historic district. The Savannah College of Art and Design was founded in 1978 and slowly began buying and restoring old buildings in the historic district, which they turned into offices and classrooms. Apartments, which were once priced for low-income families, were renovated for art students from the suburbs, pushing the poor farther and farther out of the city into more dangerous neighborhoods. When I arrived in Savannah there was an obvious tension between several contrasting social divides: the original old southern families, the poor, who were being pushed farther and farther out of the city, the art students with their parents' credit cards, the homeless, and the tourists from the suburbs. The struggle between the rich and the poor grasping for the same bits of living space was sad to me, but I was thrilled to be living in a place with diversity.

Walker Percy believed that one of the only ways for someone trapped in everydayness to momentarily break from it is in a moment of tragedy. A person living in the suburbs is for the most part oblivious to any potential for tragedy or crime. Maybe this is why crimes that take place there are usually given more media attention than crimes that occur in more urban areas. Crimes that take place in the suburbs are so unexpected and the victims probably so numb and unaware of its potential, that it makes the tragedy seem even more horrific.

*Perhaps there was a time when everydayness was not too strong one could break its grip by brute strength. Now nothing breaks it-- but disaster. Only once in my life was the grip of everydayness broken: when I lay bleeding in a ditch.<sup>4</sup>*

In other writings Percy refers to the strange sensation of pleasure when minor tragedies occur to us or to others.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid. 145.

### Aesthetic Qualities of Everydayness

Everydayness is found in the habits of daily life and is therefore most closely associated with domesticity. Because everydayness is so closely linked to the home, the stay-at-home mother becomes the primary victim of its grips. Her life is the one most closely dictated by the mind numbing tasks of everyday living. These are the tasks that are founded in routine and sameness. The cyclical nature of these routines and personal rituals have become the foundation for the feelings of safety and security in homes and therefore in the community. Historically, the man's realm was based in the world outside the home, in linear time and progress. The woman's realm existed in circular time and repetition, just as biologically her body is linked to the cyclical rhythm of nature<sup>5</sup>.

The kind of chronic boredom that plagues the stay at home mother and sometimes seems to lead to obsession and delusion remains a characteristic syndrome within more traditional families of the suburbs. This stigma of a slight psychosis that seems to develop in the stagnancy of domestic entrapment has been plotted out in many novels and films as female characters often develop fantasies or neurotic tendencies in the midst of their mundane lives. In the film version of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy dreams of Oz, a place campy, intensely exotic, and dangerous when compared to her dreary black-and-white Kansas farmhouse. Jeffrey Eugenide's, *The Virgin Suicides*, details the morbid female home life of five homebound teenage sisters, and their cerebral, paranoid mother. The narrators, neighborhood teenage boys, find one of the sisters' journals and seem to finally break into the girls' world:

*"We became acquainted with starry skies the girls had gazed at while camping years before, and the boredom of summers traipsing from back yard to front yard again... We knew what it felt like to see a boy with his shirt off, and why it made Lux write the name Kevin in purple Magic Marker all over her three-ring binder and even on her bras and panties, and we understood her rage coming home one day to find that Mrs. Lisbon had*

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<sup>5</sup> Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*, (New York University Press, New York, 2000) 82.

*soaked her things in Clorox, bleaching all the "Kevins" out. We knew the pain of winter wind rushing up your skirt and the ache of keeping your knees together in class, and how drab and infuriating it was to jump rope while the boys played baseball. We could even understand why the girls cared so much about being mature, or why they felt compelled to compliment each other... We felt the imprisonment of being a girl, the way it made your mind active and dreamy, and how you ended up knowing which colors went together."*<sup>6</sup>

In the short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1899, the narrator, a woman confined to a summer home, sinks into madness from isolation and postpartum depression<sup>7</sup>. Her husband, a doctor, restricts all physical and intellectual activities, including writing which is her passion. Deprived of any intellectual activity her condition worsens and is exasperated by her fixation with the yellow wallpaper in her room. She starts hallucinating, eventually becoming so disconnected with reality that she thinks she is a woman who was trapped in the yellow wallpaper and escaped. Although it was embellished, the story was inspired by Gilman's personal experience of depression, or "melancholia" for which a doctor prescribed a life "as domestic as possible" and a complete disengagement with any kind of reading, writing, or intellectual endeavor. She took this advice and followed it closely, and within three months she says, "came so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over."<sup>8</sup>

After wartime a home in the suburbs became a new coveted and acquirable type of Utopia. But since this safe and often sheltered life was established, I have noticed how certain people often tried to escape from it... whether through rebellion, fantasy or flight. My parents, products of the baby-boom generation, were some of the first people born into these surroundings. It's not surprising that the baby-boom generation eventually became the counter-culture generation, the feminists, the civil rights activists, the war protesters, and the ones who sought something outside the stagnancy of middleclass suburbia.

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<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Eugenides. The Virgin Suicides. (Warner Books, Inc. New York, NY, 1993) 43.

<sup>7</sup> Julie Bates Dock. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and the History of Its Publication and Reception. (Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 1998) 27-42.

## Transcending Everydayness

Everydayness is completely void of self-awareness or the transcendental. Instead, it is based in the given assumptions about life and revels around the empty repetition and false newness of popular culture. Henry David Thoreau was unique in his ability to find the sublime in his routine as he describes in his book, *Walden*. However, his life was more closely comparable to the life of an ascetic monk than it was to a person living in the suburbs. He consciously constructed his living situation, striped it of all comforts, and disengaged from society in order to commune more closely with self and the natural order of the cosmos. Thoreau was able to find transcendence in the everyday, because he attempted to *live* in a state of complete self-awareness.

*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.<sup>9</sup>*

For Thoreau, an ascetic life was a way of attaining a deeper understanding of what it meant to be alive. Transcendental philosophy developed the idea of awareness of the supernatural in a way that was intuitive, rather than guided by religious doctrine. However, some Christians, as well as people from other eastern religions, sometimes seek out hermetic, ascetic ways for the sake of their spiritual life. In the first few hundred years after Christ, Christians fleeing persecution lived out in the wilderness, allegedly sometimes living in trash heaps and tombs. In 313 AD, when Constantine made Christianity legal, many of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 86.

<sup>9</sup> Henry David Thoreau. *Walden*. (Barnes & Noble Classics, New York, NY, 2003) 74.

these Christians continued to live out in the desert country, choosing poverty over materiality. St. Francis of Assisi is probably the most famous of the "Desert Fathers," although stories of his life have become highly romanticized. I am attracted to the aesthetic that goes along with monastic retreats, the eschewing of decoration and superfluous comforts or material objects, and find the idea of a hermetic life very appealing and romantic, but the problem with this way of life for followers of Christ, is that Jesus told his followers to not separate themselves from the rest of the world. There must be some balance between being content with what one has, but with also being engaged in society.

*Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor....<sup>10</sup>*

The way we construct our life is by our choosing and this self-awareness is what rescues us. When we are able to find the sublime in our daily routine, we are no longer trapped in everydayness, because it is no longer mundane, and this is the goal of the search.

### **Seeds of My Studio Practice**

In the months before coming to VCU I realized that my work had started to take on a formula. Most of the works were large works on paper (generally about 80" x 40"), with architectural structures painted in acrylic, surrounded mostly by whiteness, which were inspired by monastic retreats and modernist ideas of Utopia and how the places we live, through both location and architecture, affect us. I used primarily pastel colors that almost dissolved into the white of the paper because I wanted to suck out most of the hue, the saturation and value of the color until all that composed the image was what was absolutely necessary for it to exist. I also felt that there was a certain virtue in the passivity and subtlety of pastel colors. This original decision has continued to affect my use of color

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.9.

in my work. I had already begun to cut the paper at this point so that the support mimicked the forms in the paintings. Small polymer clay sculptural pieces, sometimes simulating appliances, or buttons, were attached to the paper and were what actually attached the paper support to the wall, further amplifying the feeling that these works were about utilitarian design and functionality.

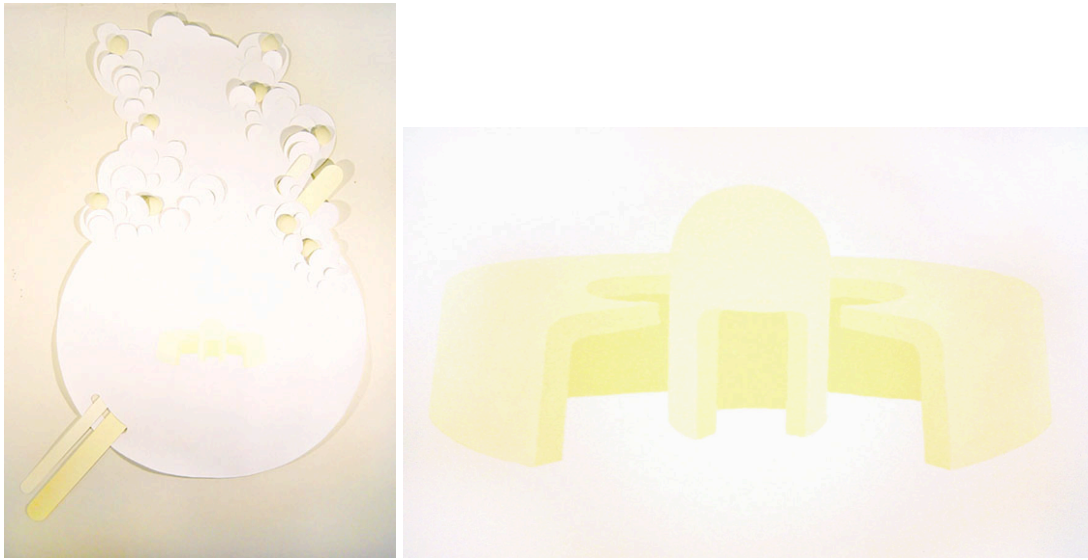


Figure 01: *Proposed Communal Hideaway Unit for Virgins*, 85" x 50", acrylic on cut paper, polymer, 2004.

Figure 02: *Proposed Communal Hideaway Unit for Virgins*, detail.

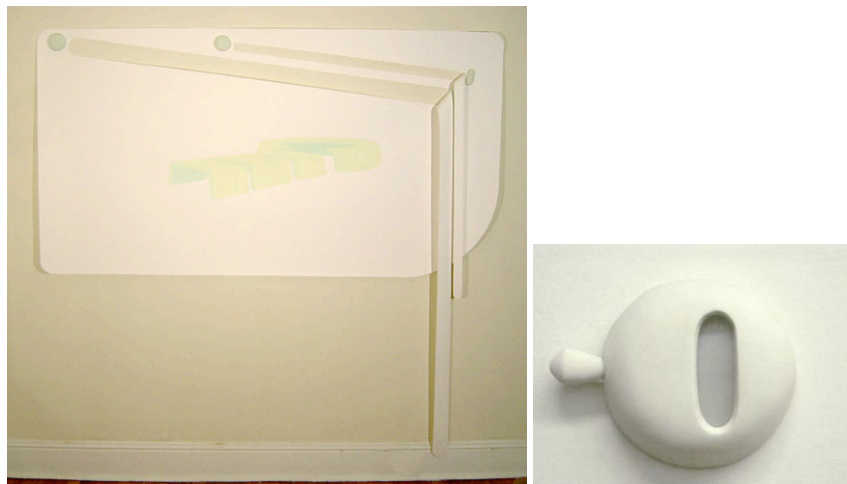


Figure 03: *Proposed Rescue Unit for Virgin Hideaways*, 65" x 80" acrylic on paper, polymer, 2004.

Figure 04: *Altarpiece*, 3" x 3 1/2" polymer clay, vellum, 2004.

From this work I have kept some of the foundational concepts including my interest

in minimalism, the aesthetics of utopia, asceticism, the flux between feminine and masculine aesthetics, and the overall theme of escaping everydayness.

Although I am aware that my studio work has developed out of the practice of painting, I am more interested in the conceptual aspect of the work. I'm not in love with paint and brushes. I am interested in color, and paint has mainly become a tool for me to achieve the visual phenomena that color induces. Rather than the material tradition of painting, my work is more involved with the conceptual practice that has evolved throughout the history of painting.

### **First Semester**

During my first semester at VCU I decided to zero in on Minimalism and really try to sort out my interest in it, relating it to my own work, and also its relationship to heroic Modernism, and its aesthetic of purity and rationality. I was interested in the idea of reduction and stripping away anything that was not necessary to the meaning of the piece. But this barrenness and blandness I eventually found was too close to the repetitive malaise and blandness of the suburban mindset that I was trying to escape from. I felt like I wanted to hang on to the idea of purity that Minimalism represented to me, but revive it from its poor stripped down state. As a female artist, I found this to be fertile ground where plays on feminine empathy and sentimentality could be directed towards masculine Modernism, and boundaries between painting and sculpture could blur. The Modernist works that I felt most linked to were the strong but pathetic droopy felt sculptures of Robert Morris, and the awkward organic works of Eva Hesse.





Figure 05: Robert Morris, *Untitled*, High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Photo by the author.

I also became interested in the work of Anne Truitt, who was one of the only Minimalist artists to use personal memories and real life experiences in the content of her stark plinths. The other Minimalist artists of the day, David Smith, Donald Judd, Carl Andre and others, were dead set on rationality over intuition. Minimalism, the last train stop of Modernism, was so close to nothingness in its self-referential qualities and striped down formalism, that nothing else could really exist beyond it. Conceptual art was the next conclusion step, but this obliterated the art object all together. The closer we try to go toward nothingness, the more we strip away, rationalize and exclude, the closer we come to death. When the work of Frank Stella was introduced to me within the context of Modernist painting, it was described as “the work of the man who tried to kill painting.” This is not something I necessarily believe but it is an idea that I find interesting and comical. I wonder now how aware these artists were of this "end game." Stella's completely self-referential works were so inward gazing that no other life was allowed in. They were so hollow and empty that they literally eventually took on holes in the canvases. I admire Stella's early work because it is so rational and pure, but I also love them for the pity they evoke in me. I love Minimalism for its stubbornness and attempt at purity and rationality. I believe these are the aesthetics of spiritual archetypes we search for in our attempt to understand God or the eternal. But Minimalism is so foreign from life because it is barren. It reduces and strips away itself to nothing. It is self-defeating.

With all of this in mind, I made *Lament for the Tragic Love Story of Two Parallel Lines*, and *Proposal for a Corsaged Anne Truitt*, because I felt like a mother consoling a lovesick teenager. The mathematical definition of two parallel lines is that they never cross, like two “star struck lovers.” I felt this way about Modernism; that it had by its own definition killed itself by not allowing outside influence, reference, or life to affect it by being so dedicated to its own rigidity. With this understanding I felt sympathetic for this artistic movement as if it were a person. I made the following works with the intent to poke fun at its own stubbornness and to “cheer it up,” at the same time idealizing its purity.

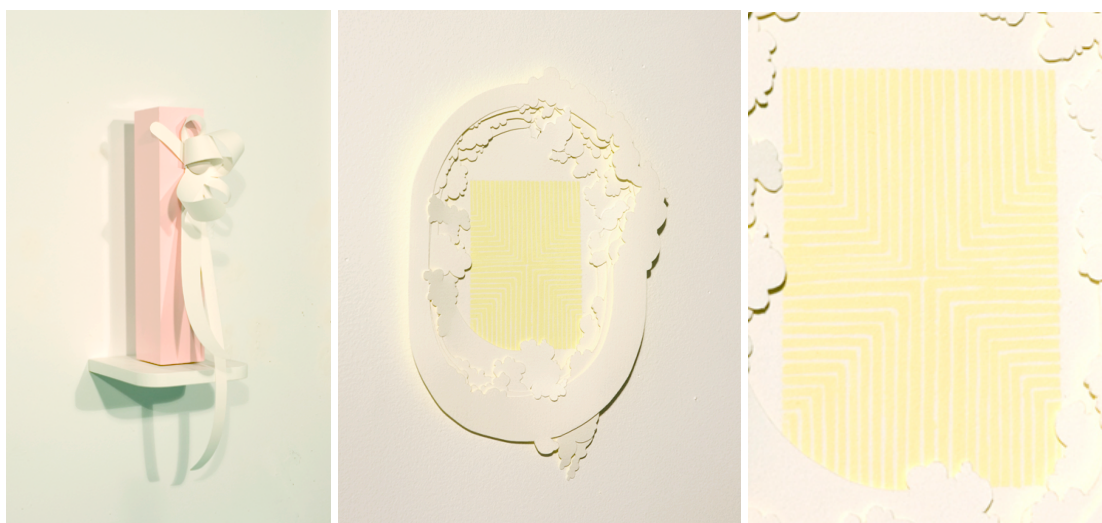


Figure 06: *Proposal for a Corsaged Anne Truitt*, 18" x 8" x 8", wood, enamel, paper, polymer, 2005.

Figure 07: *Lament for the Tragic Love Story of Two Parallel Lines*, 10" x 7", acrylic on cut paper, 2005.

Figure 08: *Lament for the Tragic Love Story of Two Parallel Lines*, detail



Figure 09: *Big Fat Corsaged Monochrome*, 65" x 50", cut paper, acrylic, polymer, 2005.

Figure 10: *Big Fat Monochrome with Party Streamers*, 70" x 60", cut paper, polymer, 2005.

I soon found myself escaping into a fantasy world where sentimentality and my interest in making work about and "for" people, rather than about art won out. I realized that my aesthetic inclinations were really based in ideas of asceticism, utopia, purity, and the idea of placeness; some of which could be misconstrued for pure Modernism. This desire to make art for life rather than art for art, opened up in me a freedom for decoration, reveling in detail and ornamentation and color. This impulse developed from small 3" x 3" cutouts of clouds, to a large-scale breakthrough installation piece titled *Proposed Meeting Place for Daniel and Trace*.



Figure 11: *Alert Blue Cloud Mini*, 3"x3", cut paper, 2005.

Figure 12: *Little Saggy Fat Cloud*, 3"x3", cut paper, 2005.

Figure 13: *Fat Cloud Mini*, 3"x3", cut paper, 2005.

This piece, *Proposed Meeting Place for Daniel and Trace* is based on the idea of creating an ideal place for my brother and father to reconcile and reestablish their relationship. This work established some trends for future works: most importantly, an interest in creating an object or space that would "transport" the viewer in the same way that Anish Kapoor and Katherina Grosse's works transport. Both of these artists create objects and spaces which seem so perfectly foreign that the viewer is thrown out of normal perceptions and forced into a mental state of constant perceptual shift and disorientation.

I am especially interested in Anish Kapoor's sculptures, which seem to look like they dropped out of an alternate universe or are physical archetypes from the spiritual realm. I've had two intense experiences with Kapoor's work: the first with his installation

in the Tate Modern in London, *Marsyas*, in 2003, and another experience more recently with a sculpture at the Hirschorn titled, *At the Hub of Things*. Both of my experiences with these works involved an extreme sense of the infinite, the fear of falling or being sucked into “the abyss,” extreme vertigo, and dizziness.

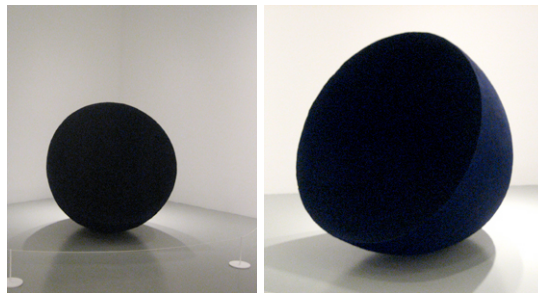


Figure 14: Anish Kapoor, *At the Hub of Things*, 64 1/8" x 55 1/2" x 59", Prussian blue pigment and polyester resin on polystyrene foam, photo by the author.

Figure 15: Anish Kapoor, *At the Hub of Things*, photo by the author.

I found myself wanting to create work that seemed to pull back the curtain to another world, or to create a space which completely transported the viewer to another universe.

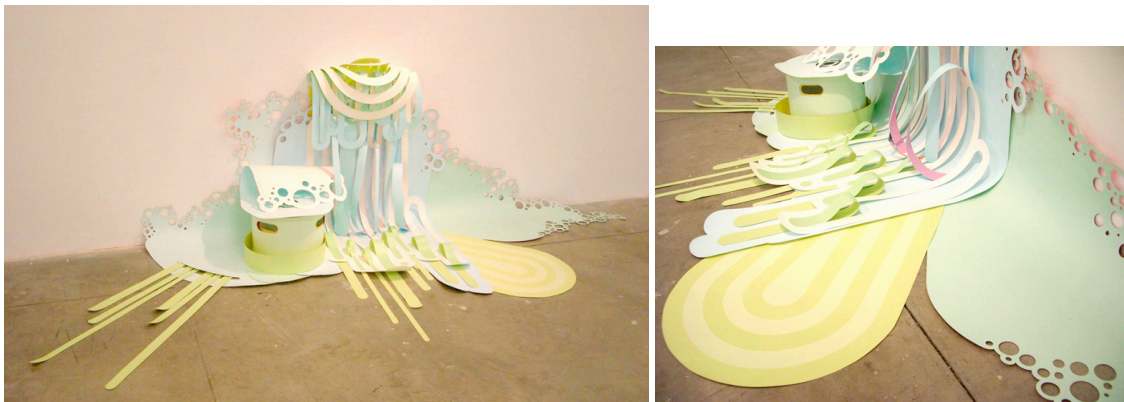


Figure 16: *Proposed Meeting Place for Daniel and Trace*, 36" x 132" x 56" acrylic on cut paper, 2005.

Figure 17: *Proposed Meeting Place for Daniel and Trace*, detail.

For the first time in *Proposed Meeting Place for Daniel and Trace*, the paper was no longer only the support, but it slid off the wall and onto the floor where it could actually start to become the object rather than the support for the illustration of the object. One of

the failures of this piece was its size. Because it is only about 36" tall, the work exists as a diorama at a very odd scale rather than an actual place. Also, the paper, cut into tails and screens has no real form. I felt like the more the paper started to take on real form and shape, the more it needed to have physical substance rather than illusional. The forms were made up of single sheets of thick paper which from their own weight bent and flopped at pathetic angles, but did not take on any permanent three-dimensional forms. I was trying to figure out how this paper could become *the thing*, rather than just be a *vehicle* for the illustration of the thing, when it really couldn't even support its own weight. I was limiting myself to paper for the most part for issues of purity: aesthetic and symbolic, and for the intent of the total transformation of the support.

## Chapter 2:

### An Anyone Anywhere or a Someone Somewhere?

*Nowadays when a person lives somewhere, in a neighborhood, the place is not certified for him. More than likely he will live there sadly and the emptiness, which is inside him, will expand until it evacuates the entire neighborhood. But if he sees a movie, which shows his very neighborhood, it becomes possible for him to live, for a time at least, as a person who is Somewhere and not Anywhere.*  
*Walker Percy, The Moviegoer*<sup>11</sup>

The places we live can drastically affect our perception of ourselves and the intensity with which we go after our desires. Likewise, our perception of ourselves is largely based in our ability to successfully exist in a place. These degrees of success are usually measured by the health of our relationships in that place, and our ability to improve our standard of living, or to gain recognition. Often when we become dissatisfied with ourselves we try to change our place, and expect it to affect our satisfaction and understanding of our self and our relationship to the world. The perfect example of this would be the "Promised Land" that the Israelites sought after as described in the book of Exodus in the Bible. This new land was to be the place where Israel would be set apart as a nation, no longer the slaves of all the surrounding communities. They were to be a family nation reunited with the God of their ancestors. Their only national laws would be ones directly related to their faith. It was to be the place where they would find their true identity as a people. For forty years the Israelites wandered the desert before they settled in their Promised Land. Perhaps the problem with the suburbs is not the place itself, but the mindsets of the people within it. Outside of our Promised Land we feel lost, purposeless,

empty, but in it we feel fulfilled, justified, and reunited with our true selves.

Sometimes living in a place like the suburbs which feels so much like so many other places, results in a feeling of inauthentic experience. It is the feeling that you are one of many other people feeling nothing particularly different or exceptional, and that you are not able to contribute anything particularly different or meaningful. This is the state of an *anyone anywhere*: the state of the self, lost in the malaise of his everydayness. This is not a feeling of reassuring solidarity, it's a feeling of being just another sheep.

A *someone somewhere* however, is the state of the self, discovering significance through his role in his perceived value of his surroundings. Sometimes living in a place with a unique feeling of placeness, results in a feeling of authentic experience, even if it's just one's perception of that place that causes the change. It is the feeling that you are a unique person, as unique as your experiences in that place. This person would be experiencing the feeling of authentic experience, rather than inauthentic experience. But it's not just the man as a separate organism fulfilled through his location; this fulfillment also involves self-awareness and understanding of self and self's relation to the world. In the novel, *The Moviegoer*, by Walker Percy, the introductory quote is from Soren Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*: "... the specific character of despair is precisely this, it is unaware of being in despair." The *someone somewhere* is aware of the potential for despair and aware of it in himself and others and the possible reasons for it.

*The Moviegoer* is set in New Orleans, a city not too aesthetically different from Savannah. The main character, Binx Bolling is a melancholy stockbroker bachelor, and seemingly the only self-aware person in a world full of actors. He goes to the movies to store up memories of magical moments that his own life is void of and tries to create authentic moments in his own life, but they only cause him to sink farther into his own desperation. He lives in the suburbs on the outskirts of New Orleans, and the uniformity of his neighborhood contrasts the gritty harlotry and creepy genteel charm of the old city. Binx describes his life as a person who seems to be aware of his everydayness but in trying to revel in it, he only sinks further into depression. In desperation, Binx has an idea for

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<sup>11</sup> Walker Percy. *The Moviegoer*. (Vintage Books, Random House Inc., New York, 1960) 63.



something he calls "the search." "*The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life... To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.*"<sup>12</sup> As Thorough says, this understanding of what it means to not let ourselves become bogged down by everydayness or inauthentic experience is an integral part of being truly alive.

*We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour. If we refused, or rather used up, such paltry information as we get, the oracles would distinctly inform us how this might be done.*<sup>13</sup>

## Second Semester

The second semester of my first year at VCU resulted in a focus on three large pieces, two of which were shown in our candidacy exhibit at the end of the year. These pieces were *Moshi Moshi Anne Truitt Minimini!* and *Lament for Princess Diana and All Our Little Hopes That She Drug With Her on Her Twenty-five Foot Bridal Train*. With these pieces I incorporated wall painting with two-dimensional cut paper and three-dimensional paper constructions. I had made a conscious decision to be bolder, more assertive with color, pattern, and size in order to flesh out this desire for placeness in more visceral experiential detail. I tried to put away my timidity. Each of the elements worked together to create a new world, and I felt like I was getting closer to the sense of placeness

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Henry David Thoreau. *Walden*. (Barnes & Noble Classics, New York, NY, 2003) 74.



that I was searching for.

*Lament for Princess Diana* was an experiment in shifts of scale, with the length of the piece being 25 feet long, the actual length of Princess Diana's wedding gown, and with a mock model of the oval island on which Princess Diana is buried, within the interior of the sculpture. I devised a way for the paper to appear to support itself by making foam supports inside the stepped base of the sculpture. This was an important development and one that would drastically affect the way I constructed later work.



Figure 18: *Lament for Princess Diana and All Our Little Hopes That She Drug With Her on Her Twenty-five Foot Bridal Train*, acrylic on cut paper, wall painting, polymer, mixed media, 2006

Figure 19: *Lament for Princess Diana*... installation view



Figure 20: *Lament for Princess Diana*... detail.

Figure 21: *Lament for Princess Diana*... detail.

Both pieces incorporated wall painting. The wall painting in *Moshi Moshi* mimicked the flatness of the cut paper, while *Lament for Princess Diana*, used wall painting more like a stage background is used to create illusional space. I felt like the wall painting in the latter was a step forward in transforming the space into a place, but it lacked substance, and desired a more seamless flow between the sculpture and the gallery space. I knew that wall painting would later become an important element in actually transforming the gallery space.



Figure 22: *Moshi Moshi* Anne Truitt *Minimini!* Acrylic on cut paper, wall painting, mixed media, 2006.  
Figure 23: *Moshi Moshi* Anne Truitt *Minimini!* detail.



Figure 24: *Moshi Moshi* Anne Truitt *Minimini!* detail.  
Figure 25: *Moshi Moshi* Anne Truitt *Minimini!* detail.

In *Moshi Moshi Anne Truitt Minimini*, I returned to thoughts of Minimalism, but approached it the same way I approached ideas of my brother and father's relationship in *Proposed Meeting Place for Daniel and Trace*. I had started to realize that throughout my entire life I've looked at objects as anthropomorphic beings. In Kindergarten I learned my letters and numbers by giving them genders and thinking about them like characters in a story. I realized that I look at and sympathize with art movements, artists, and art theorists much in the same way I sympathize with characters in novels. As a result, in *Moshi Moshi*, multiple little Minimalists plinths made of paper found their homes and hiding places in a strange world alternating between flatness and 3-D, color fields and patterns, feminine curls and masculine rigidity.

Two Japanese companies, Decole and Cram Cream, part of the *kawaii* cute culture, and *zakka* fad in Japan, largely influenced the strength of the colors and patterns. *Zakka* is a term in Japan referring to any item that “spruces up” the home, one’s life or outlook. These are often objects made in Japan or China, based on items from the West, which would be considered kitsch in their country of origin. *Zakka* has also been described as “the art of seeing the savvy in the ordinary and mundane”. The products pictured below on the left, are based on French wooden toys and accessories of the 40s and 50s, but they are made in China, and designed by the Japanese company, Decole.



Figure 26: Examples of zakka, Decole products from left: ring holder, magnets, note holder, tape dispenser, whistle, and jewelry box. Collection of the author.



Figure 27: Cram Cream pouch. Collection of the author.

## CHAPTER 3

### Utopias: The Idea of the Ideal

Throughout time the human race has dreamt of paradise. Whether these dreams have been of places that exist in the natural, in the spiritual realm, or the internal, the search has always been there. It's almost as if we were hardwired with this intuition from the beginning. The thing that spurs change in individuals and in societies is distaste for the present, a desire to change it, and the realization that one has at least some power to do so. In psychology this is called an *internal locus of control*. It is a sign of a healthy, well adjusted person: one that believes he or she is responsible for his or her own life and happiness and that we are all responsible for making the necessary changes to be happy. But whether it is a tiny spur that encourages us to make great advancements, or a disease that makes us constantly dissatisfied with our present states, it is as if something lurks behind our consciousness whispering to us constantly that "this is not all, there has to be more... and something better."

We don't find this as a trend in just one race or belief system, but people of all different times and places throughout history have sought out Utopia, the perfection of life on earth, or they have trudged through this life with the hope of a more perfect existence after this one. Because this research and the discussion of the idea of everydayness mostly relates to the western world, I will focus on trends of ideas of utopias that have mainly influenced the west. This will include a few different perspectives on Christianity, even though it is an eastern belief system, because it has been the predominant religion in western culture and probably more influential than any other religion, or philosophy in the United States.

The word *utopia* has changed meaning over time. The original Greek word *utopia*, meant "no place," or, "place that does not exist." In 1516 Thomas Moore wrote about a fictitious island where an extremely organized, peaceful, and rational commonwealth was in full operation, and he named the island Utopia<sup>14</sup>. This reference to the word and the content of the book has shaped our meaning of the word. The book follows the observations of a traveler on this island and he recounts all the ways of life, of government and of commerce within the society. Many believe *Utopia* was designed after Plato's *Republic*, where all laws and social structure are based in equality and pacifism.

These kinds of ideas of paradise on earth can be sorted into several different categories but usually exist as various combinations of these four:

Political Utopia: the goal of establishing the perfect government and sometimes replacing any other familial or religious loyalties with governmental loyalties.

Economic Utopia: a commonwealth or communal living arrangement that usually includes the abolition of money

Technological Utopia: an ideal standard of living perfected through technology and architecture.

Religious Utopia: an attempt to establish or reestablish the morals of the faith within the society as the primary governing force.

It is the aesthetic that people have applied to this fantasized, ideal place of purity and perfection that I am most interested in. These iconographic aesthetics of utopia have developed in different Modernist architectural versions of Utopia, literature and film's futuristic worlds, and many different attempts at ascetic living. I am interested in the aesthetics that have developed out of the pursuits for a more perfect existence and how they contribute to the transcendence and escape from the *here and now*.

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Moore. *Utopia*. (Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 2001) 51-135.



### **The Old Testament: The Connection Between the Spiritual and Physical**

At several points in the Old Testament there is a reference to other versions of a more perfect reality: the Garden of Eden, the Promised Land and Mount Zion. For the Jewish people, Zion was intended to be an actual, attainable place where man was reconciled to God through a personal spiritual life, and through law. This is one trend of utopia: the idea of a place or community where the physical nature of life and the spiritual are reconciled. Israel's relationship with God was directly dependent on physical personal and familial ritual. The problem that developed was that the Israelites allowed the external physical nature and the repetition of certain rituals to stand in place of interior worship or dedication. Several places throughout the Old Testament, God is recorded as lamenting, “I desire compassion, not sacrifice.” But because the physical is more readily measurable and ascertainable than internal repentance, the Israelites began to measure faithfulness by dedication to the law, rather than by interior dedication. This resulted in the addition of more and more new laws until for most people the physical connection to the spiritual was virtually lost. The original intention for the law and ritual was to allow the people to maintain a clear conscience before their creator so that they could live their lives free of guilt or remorse and in as close communication with God as possible. The rituals revolved around an interior part of the temple with specially designed utensils, lamps, altars, tables and garments for the priests.

I think this connection between the supernatural and the physical is an important relationship to highlight. In the physical routine of ritual, the Israelites were asked to reconcile their inner and spiritual “hang-ups”. I think there is an important similar relationship in art making between the physical object and the conceptual aspect of the object or the potential for transcendental experience which the object can induce. Every object the artist creates is compacted and imbued with ideas and sensibilities reminiscent of transcendent moments, cultural and spiritual insights, which then transfer through the object like a conduit to the viewer. These objects that we spend our lives making have the

ability to hold all of these kinds of experiences like a computer chip, or as a semi-conductor for visceral experience. The viewer only has to access them.

### **Inward Utopias: The Path to the Interior of the Heart**

*The Way of the Pilgrim* is the personal life account of an anonymous Christian Russian pilgrim living in the 19th century, who pursues the meaning of Christ's commandment to 'pray ceaselessly.' At the beginning of the book he hears the words from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians: "*Be cheerful no matter what; pray all the time; thank God no matter what happens*"<sup>15</sup>. But the pilgrim wonders how it could be possible "for a man to pray without ceasing when the practical necessities of life demand so much attention."<sup>16</sup> In other words the pilgrim wants to know how he can transcend the everydayness of his life, the personal routine and hand to mouth living that distracts him from living in a more spiritually aware state. He makes it his quest to understand what it means to "pray without ceasing" and travels the Russian countryside to find monks and spiritual teachers to learn from. What he finds is a book called the *Philokalia*, which translated from Greek, literally means, "to love the beautiful." He also learns of something called "the Jesus prayer" which is promised to lead him on "the path to the interior of the heart". The prayer is simply to repeat the words, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!"<sup>17</sup>

After diligent study of the *Philokalia* and repeating the Jesus prayer thousands of times a day, the little pilgrim begins to feel he is making progress in his spiritual pursuits. He finds that calling on the grace of Jesus during every moment has become inseparable part of his everyday life. Rather than the physical rituals and routines the Israelites regularly used to consecrate themselves to God, it is grace the pilgrim calls on to reframe his relationship with his heavenly father.

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<sup>15</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message // Remix: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. (Navpress, Colorado Springs, CO. 2003) 2156. (*1 Thessalonians 5:16-18*)

<sup>16</sup> Anonymous, *The Way of the Pilgrim* (Doubleday, New York, 1978) 3.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 9.

His teacher tells him "Now you may recite the prayer as many times as you wish; call on the name of Jesus all your waking moments, without counting, and humbly resign yourself to God's will expecting help from Him. I believe that He will direct your path and will not forsake you."<sup>18</sup> The pilgrim goes on to enjoy feelings of inner peace and contentedness:

*"After receiving this direction, I spent the rest of the summer reciting the name of Jesus vocally and I enjoyed great peace. During my sleep I often dreamed that I was praying. And if I happened to meet people during the day they all seemed as close to me as if they were my kinsmen, even though I did not know them. My thoughts had quieted down completely; I thought only of the Prayer, to which my mind now began to listen, and my heart produced certain warmth and gladness... My solitary hut was to me like a splendid palace..."*<sup>19</sup>

It was the little crippled pilgrim's state of mind and the relinquishing of his life that made his world feel like a utopia, despite the fact that nothing had physically changed in his life: he remained homeless, crippled, hungry and destitute. It's not that the pilgrim's prayer were magic words or an incantation. His voice, repeating this phrase was simply a constant reminder to him to open his heart toward God and toward good. Paul said in a letter to the Philippians:

*"Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious----the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies."*<sup>20</sup>

Like the pilgrim, in his letter, Paul goes on to describe how he has learned to be content, no matter what his circumstances:

*"I'm just as happy with little as with much, with much as with little. I've found the recipe for being happy whether full or hungry, hands full or*

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.13.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Eugene H. Peterson. The Message // Remix: The Bible in Contemporary Language. (Navpress, Colorado Springs, CO. 2003) 2139. (*Philippians 4:8-9*)



*hands empty. Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am.*"<sup>21</sup>

In a different letter Paul goes on to recognize the everydayness that we get bogged down in may be even more potentially hazardous when grace is the standard and no longer any rituals call us to daily penance or forced remembrance.

*"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday ordinary life--- your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life--- and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out."*<sup>22</sup>

Thomas Merton said something similar, warning us that if we strayed too far from everydayness, then our attempts at devotion may turn up empty:

*Cutting wood, clearing ground, cutting grass, cooking soup, drinking fruit juice, sweating, washing, making fire, smelling smoke, sweeping, etc. This is religion. The further one gets away from this, the more one sinks in the mud of words and gestures. The flies gather.*<sup>23</sup>

In this way the utopian internal state becomes the desired spur that causes us to mindfully live in our present state, no matter how or where, just as self-awareness is one way to escape from the pits of everydayness. In the context of Thomas Merton's statement, any attempt at spirituality that is not grounded in awareness of the everyday will become too lofty or pretentious.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. (*Philippians 4:10-14*)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 2052. (*Romans 12:1-2*)

## Shakers, Early Christians, and Communal Living

*"From each according to his ability, to each according to his need."*

*Father Joseph Meacham<sup>24</sup>*

Mother Anne Lee, a Quaker from Manchester England who was expelled for her unusual beliefs, led her few followers from England to New York in 1774 with a vision of a society that wasn't corrupted by the outside world or "carnal relations" between its followers. This society, based in a belief in celibacy, meant that men and women could operate equally within the society, living separately but with equal importance and leadership within the commune. Mother Anne's vision was of a society of believers where the members existed together like a family of innocent children, and were to be considered equal in gender, race and age. Note that this ambition was formed before feminism, and in the midst of slavery. They also operated on the early church of the New Testament's example of holding all things in common, and converts surrendered their possessions for the good of the whole. Believers made a personal decision to join the sect, and as believers did not have children, this prevented members from being born into this belief system so that people in the society were true converts, making a conscious decision about their life. In effect the believers were consciously dedicated to this way of life and this probably greatly attributed to the success of the group. It was not a place for loafers as the believers worked rigorous twelve hour days, rising at four thirty in the morning, and doing at least an hour and a half's worth of work before even sitting down for breakfast.

Ann died in 1784 and did not live to see the intricate communities that her followers formed in the new country. The believers that started the first shaker communities, as we know them, took time to plan in detail the way their communal living

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Merton. Seeking Paradise. (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY. 2003.) 33.

<sup>24</sup> June Sprigg and David Larkin. Shaker Life, Work, and Art (Smithmark Publishers, New York, NY. 1987.) 111.

arrangements would work before they began them.<sup>25</sup> This self-sustaining society, which believed in simplicity, and in keeping all things in common, resulted in a highly recognizable group aesthetic which affected all forms of life including their homes, furniture, and house hold objects. Their attempt was to create a society as close to heaven on earth as possible and they attempted it through extreme organization, self-discipline, order, and simplification, even though their worship focused on ecstatic clapping dancing and singing. Later in this paper I will discuss more in depth the resulting aesthetics of this intent.

The prominent difference between the Shakers and the early church is that Christ never taught believers to separate themselves from society. He taught them that the Kingdom of God on earth was not a place, but that it existed inside of them when they committed themselves to God--- just like the little Russian Pilgrim who discovered this through finding the path to the interior of his heart where he found that Christ dwelled within him. Jesus also taught that what made men unclean was not the things that they came into contact with, it was what came *out* of them, what came out of their mouths, their hearts, their actions. Jesus spent time with and was friends with people that others at the time considered “unclean”. About our lives on earth Jesus said this:

*“God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you in a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand--- shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.”<sup>26</sup>*

The first generation of Christ-followers were people of all different ages, backgrounds, races and nationalities. Believers in each city formed communities, sometimes only meeting in secret because of persecution. *"They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and prayers... And all the*

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<sup>25</sup> June Sprigg and David Larkin. Shaker Life, Work and Art. (Smithmark Publishers, New York, NY. 1987.) 22.

<sup>26</sup> Eugene H. Peterson. The Message // Remix: The Bible in Contemporary Language. (Navpress, Colorado Springs, CO. 2003) 1772. (*Matthew 5:13-16*)

*believers lived in wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met.*"<sup>27</sup> But like Paul they also made themselves as much like the people of their culture as possible, in order to live peacefully with everyone and in order to share with them this new perspective on having a relationship with God. Paul said: *"Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized--- whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ--- but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view."*<sup>28</sup>

The early church lived in society but also had a strong community close to that society, where they supported each other's needs. There have been other more contemporary experiments in Christian-based communal living and most of them have either chosen to live in the most urban neighborhoods possible, or to exclude themselves from society all together.

### **Outsider Artists and Their Created Worlds**

In his book, *Gardens of Revelation*, John Beardsley researches and documents self-taught artists and their tendency to create their own worlds in their personal space. He says: "These environments are made to surround and even engulf the home; they often have an obsessive character and are the result of many years of work."<sup>29</sup> These domestic spaces, so linked to everydayness, are taken over by these artists and transformed by visionary forms of architecture, often compulsive decoration, and fused into new authentic personal created

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 1976. (*Acts 2:42-45*)

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 2075. (*1 Corinthians 9:19-22*)

<sup>29</sup> John Beardsley. *Gardens of Revelation*. (Abbeville Press, New York, 1995.) 7.

worlds. These worlds sometimes fill their homes, yards, gardens, rooftops, drawers, and accumulate in every fantastical and mundane place of their homes.

The artist Nellie Mae Rowe is particularly interesting to me because she was a self-taught Atlanta artist who regarded her talent as a gift from God, not taking the credit herself. She believed making drawings of the people she knew was a way to pray for them. She once stated, “I see people crippled and I draw them to ask the Lord to help.” She was born in 1900 and made work up until 1982, the year she died. She used whatever materials she could get her hands on, usually drawing with crayons and pencil on scraps of paper and box lids, and sometimes making dolls and sculptures out of used chewing gum, which filled her house and yard. She lived in Atlanta most of her life, and her house was well known to the locals because her sculptures filled her front yard, and decorated the front of her house to the point of spectacle. Late in her life when her work became well known, visitors and curators would often come to see this little world she had created which she fondly called “Nellie’s Playhouse.” Attention was not always positive however, as her home was in an upper-class neighborhood just down the street from the Governor’s mansion. She transformed her personal world into a more fantastical version of her past, enshrining people and memories in her drawings and sculptures.



Figure 28: Nellie Mae Rowe, crayon and pencil on box lid, with text: “Lord, Help Me Please, 1981”, High Museum of Art, Atlanta GA. Photo by the author.

Fantasy drawings and the imaginary worlds of these artists have become a way for them to

retreat from their common lives. Many self-taught artists of many different times and nationalities have transformed their personal spaces as a way of creating a more fantastical place to exist.

### Third Semester

I began my second year at VCU with a conscious effort to create work that formed a cohesive sense of place. In the installation piece, *Your Place, My Place, Everybody's Place*, the sculpture and wall elements began to work together like furniture and wallpaper. In this piece the stripes on the wall are not wall painting, but painted paper, adhered to the wall with wax adhesive--- the same kind of adhesive that Kara Walker uses to apply her cut paper silhouettes to the wall.

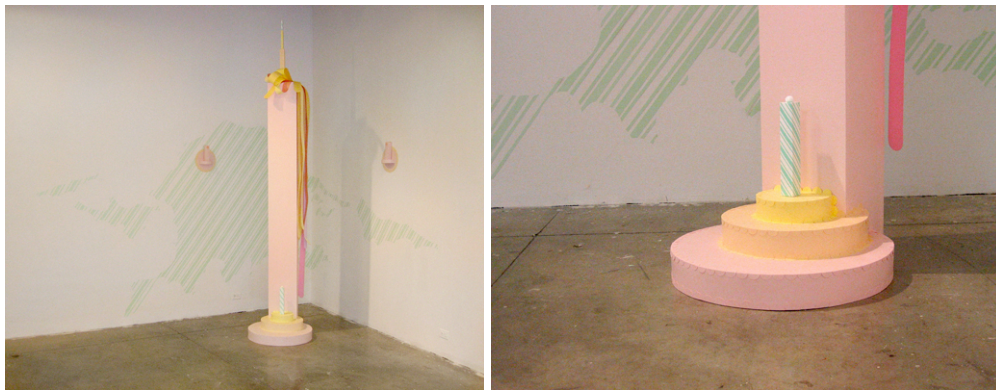


Figure 29: *Your Place, My Place, Everybody's Place*, wood, acrylic on cut paper, mixed media, 2006.

Figure 30: *Your Place, My Place, Everybody's Place* detail.

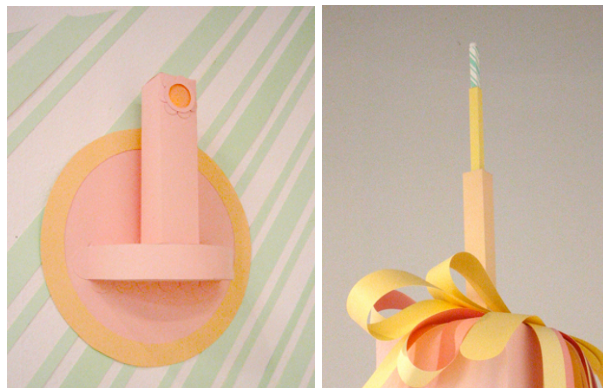


Figure 31: *Your Place, My Place, Everybody's Place*, wood, acrylic on cut paper, mixed media, 2006.  
 Figure 32: *Your Place, My Place, Everybody's Place* detail.

Visually the stripes work like wallpaper, the negative space referring back to the cloud imagery I used in *Lament for Princess Diana* to loosely symbolize "otherworldliness." The symmetry also references formal arrangements found in homes and churches, the size hierarchy slightly alluding to royalty: all elements, which would inform my next work, *There is a place for you in my heart of hearts*.



Figure 33: *There is a Place for You in My Heart of Hearts*, acrylic on cut paper wall painting, 2006.  
 Figure 34: *There is a Place for You in My Heart of Hearts* detail.



Figure 35: *There is a Place for You in My Heart of Hearts* detail.  
 Figure 36: *There is a Place for You in My Heart of Hearts* detail.

The symmetry of this piece refers to an altar with a central focus point and smaller vignettes flanking it. In the creation of this piece I added some new devices to my visual vocabulary as the piece dictated. The title of this piece refers to a place, but to a place

which exists interiorly, perhaps in the heart or in the mind, rather than exteriorly. The idea of this place is very similar to “the path to the interior of the heart” which the little Russian pilgrim searches for in *The Way of the Pilgrim*. The plinth, traditionally throughout minimalism, a tall four-sided structure, began to multiply in the work. The sides multiplied also, creating prisms with five, six, and eight sides. In my work, minimalism was no longer barren, but fertile. I finally felt like I was no longer wrestling with Modernism, but had taken it into my family, nurtured it, and helped it grow. In freeing myself from this huge concept of minimalism, I had also once again allowed personal references into the work. I felt free to the point that any content, personal, political, historical or aesthetic could come and go out of the work as needed.

Simultaneous to *There is a Place for You in my Heart of Hearts*, I was also making *Little Green Vigil for Here and There* which also has personal meaning relating to conflict within my family. I returned to dioramas, a device I will probably continue to use when needed, with a small diorama of the room I grew up in at my parents’ house inside the box, which sits on something like a Victorian nightstand. I was interested in the way this piece individually would function in a larger installation, literally as if it were something like a piece of furniture in this new world I was creating. The side of the box on the nightstand contains a small hidden drawer that holds an electric tea light. Conceptually this little tea light would allow me to keep vigil for things happening in my life in this place where I live now, but also in the place that I came from which the diorama represents. This also references the way prayer transcends place, time and space.





Figure 37: Little Green Vigil for Here and There, acrylic on cut paper, wall painting, mixed media, 2006.

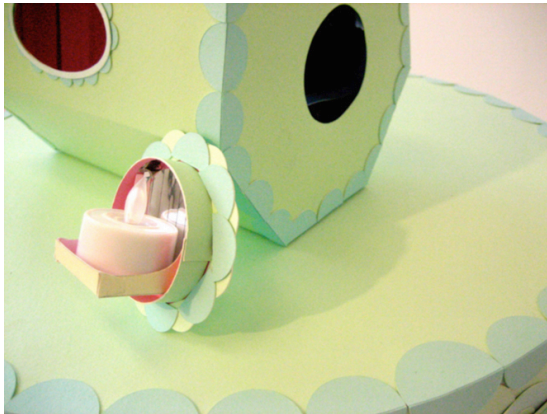


Figure 38: Little Green Vigil... detail.



Figure 39: Little Green Vigil... detail.

Other similar works followed and I sought to find out how much the wall painting and sculptures could be fused together, their boundaries blurred. I'm afraid they more referenced facade when restricted to the wall. *Little Crumb-bum Keepsake*, a reference to a line from *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger had this issue. I again realized the work had to frame out real experiential space, rather than illusional space. In making this piece however, I realized how interested I am in the idea of the conflicting macro-cosm and micro-cosm within the same work. It was as if the sculptures themselves were becoming landscapes for an even tinier species of works; like the Lilliputians who climb over the sleeping Gulliver as if he were a mountain range as they attempt tie him down. I liked the

idea of these smaller worlds existing within a larger one, co-habituating and mingling. To me these smaller worlds represent our small planet in the ever-expanding galaxy, or the artist navigating the ever-evolving practice of art making.



Figure 40: *Little Crumb-bum Keepsake*, acrylic on cut paper, wall painting, PVC vinyl, mixed media, 2006.

Figure 41: *Little Crumb-bum Keepsake*, detail.



Figure 42: *Little Crumb-bum Keepsake*, detail.

Figure 43: *Little Crumb-bum Keepsake*, detail.

## Chapter 4

### Shakers and The Aesthetic of Purity

*"Trifles make perfection, but perfection is no trifle"*<sup>30</sup>

*"Put your hands to work and your hearts to God, and a blessing will  
attend you."  
Mother Anne Lee*<sup>31</sup>

Neoclassicism developed in the last part of the 18th century, influenced by ideas emerging from the Enlightenment of joining reason and idealism to aesthetic purity.<sup>32</sup> The Neoclassic aesthetic used intellectualized or man made and perfected pure forms such as circles, spheres, squares, rectangles, cubes and ovals as an aesthetic which projected calm, rational behavior and self-awareness. Design elements were based in symmetry, gravity, and simplicity. In the late 1700s these design elements were being developed by the aristocracy in England and eventually were picked up by the lower classes who imitated the aesthetic and also by Americans who tried to keep up with England in quality of living and taste.<sup>33</sup>

The Shakers, who so rigorously and thoughtfully lived out their lives on earth, chose to eschew all worldly, superfluous possessions in order to focus on their internal, spiritual lives. When the first communities were started the group simply used whatever possessions the new converts brought with them. As time went on, individual uniform

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<sup>30</sup> June Sprigg and David Larkin. Shaker Life, Work and Art. (Smithmark Publishers, New York, NY. 1987.) 134.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 110.

<sup>32</sup> John T. Kirk. The Shaker World: Art, Life, Belief. (Harry N. Abrams, Inc. New York, NY. 1997.) 36.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 37.

furniture and accessories were created for each member so a sense of equality was established. Many Shaker tradesmen were already knowledgeable in making furniture in Neo-classical design prior to joining the community and this influenced the aesthetic that would be developed by the Shakers throughout the early part of the 1800s. But even more so the creators decidedly simplified designs and eliminated any decoration. The Shakers used forms in their furniture and architecture that were practical and simple to make in large quantities, and sympathetic to their theological interests.<sup>34</sup> The result is work that is extremely beautiful and graceful in its simplicity and an impression that the simplicity of the design could be based on the archetype of an object--- the object in its purest most simple state. This also results in the feeling that an object in that state transcends its own banality and purpose, becoming symbolic for a higher level of existence.



Figure 44: Copies of traditional Shaker Boxes, made by the author. Photo by the author.

A famous quote by Thomas Merton references the transcendental quality of their work: "The peculiar grace of a Shaker chair is due to the fact that it was made by someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit on it." <sup>35</sup> The simplification of the designs for furniture and household objects was not born out of an intention to eliminate

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

beauty because as John T. Kirk, an expert on Shaker history and art states, "Purging and restriction do not, however, eliminate beauty. It is always present. It is an instinct. People have a drive to be surrounded by what they find appropriate... The Shakers were, and are not against beauty, but against ostentation; they have consciously and unconsciously, made thousands of aesthetic choices."<sup>36</sup>

Mother Anne consistently told her followers, "Put your hands to work and your hearts to God." So as the Shakers went about their day, they focused on their internal dedication to God as they did normal and mundane tasks such as sweeping the floor, making chairs, baskets and furniture, weaving fabric and plowing fields. A heightened sense of devotion and perfection affected their work and caused the quality of Shaker work to stand out among the work of other craftsmen of the day. The Shakers commonly put their goods for sale in nearby towns where they sold furniture, clothing, baskets, applesauce, seeds and other "fancy goods," sometimes giving these objects sold to the public just a little more color or ornament than the ones they would make for themselves. Set apart from the rest of the world's influences the shaker aesthetic continued to develop and become more and more simple, even as the outside world went through architectural trends of more ornamental design. About the simplicity of their aesthetic, a few phrases developed and were collected in a book about Shaker Furniture:

*"Regularity is beautiful.*

*There is great beauty in harmony.*

*Order is the creation of beauty. It is heaven's first law, and the protection of souls.*

*Love of Beauty has a wider field of action in association with Moral Force.*

*Beauty rests on utility. All beauty that has not a foundation in use soon grows distasteful and needs continual replacement with something new.*

*That which has in itself the highest use possesses the greatest beauty."*<sup>37</sup>

The Shakers were interested, possibly unconsciously, but obviously collectively tuned-in to finding something universal, pure, lasting and elemental in their aesthetic

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas Merton. Seeking Paradise. (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY. 2003.) 11.

<sup>36</sup> John T. Kirk. The Shaker World: Art, Life, Belief. (Harry N. Abrams, Inc. New York, NY. 1997.) 54.

standard. I find this similar to the intent of Modernism's similar collective unconscious intent of finding the pure state of objects and materials, which don't get thrown out with new trends, but last beyond them and are not susceptible to time.

The Shakers also saw the parallel between physical life on earth, and life in the heavenly realms. Thomas Merton wrote, comparing William Blake to the Shakers:

*"Neither the Shakers nor Blake would be disturbed at the thought that a work-a-day bench, cupboard, or table might also and at the same time be furniture in and for heaven: did not Blake protest mightily at the blindness of "single vision" which saw only the outward and material surface of reality, nor its inner spiritual "form" and the still more spiritual "force" from which the form proceeds? These, for Blake, were not different realities. They are one."*<sup>38</sup>

Thomas Merton was a priest and expert on monastic practice, who lived in the 1960s near one of the Shaker communities, which had been abandoned because of the dwindling membership. His first experience with the Shaker aesthetics was wondering around on the grounds by himself among the empty buildings. In personal notes he described the Shakers as being "something of a sign-mystery--- a strange misguided attempt at utter honesty that wanted to be too pure--- but ended up by being nevertheless pure and good, though in many ways absurd. This loyalty to a vision leading nowhere...It haunts me at times. I mean the atmosphere and spirit, the image they created, the archetype." I find this so similar to Minimalism and its pursuit of pure rationality to the point of absurdity. This totally intrigues me, as I am very fond of the absurd.

In these writings he goes on to describe the interconnectedness of their work and their spirituality and that he was most interested in: "...their spirit and I might say their mysticism, in practice as evidenced by their life and their craftsmanship. To me the Shakers are of very great significance, besides being something of a mystery, by their wonderful integration of the spiritual and the physical in their work. There is no question in my mind that one of the finest and most genuine religious expressions of the nineteenth century is in the silent eloquence of Shaker craftsmanship."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 55.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Merton. Seeking Paradise. (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY. 2003.) 75-76.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 21.



### Fourth Semester

The last semester of my time at VCU has been spent making work for my thesis exhibit, which I have approached with the intent of creating an installation with a sense of authentic placeness in that it connects the spiritual and physical in the same way that we see it happening in the work of the Shakers and in the ancient Jewish temple. The aesthetic of my current work alludes to fantasy, science fiction, and to a place which exists interiorly rather than physically. The primary difference between my work and the work of the Shakers, or the ritualistic objects of the Israelites, is that the world I am creating is not functional in this life, but alludes to a place where it could be. The fact that these sculptures are made of paper also alludes to the fragility of the physical and highlights the contrast of the eternal quality of the spiritual. These works exist in the state when purity and rationality are confronted with other spiritual qualities like love, forgiveness, grace, until that state is multiplied in the abundance of these qualities.



Figure 45: *Prism Pivot Point*, MFA Thesis Exhibit, Anderson Gallery, Installation View

The title of the exhibit is *Prism Pivot Point*, which refers to the point in my work when the Minimalist plinth turned from its simple banality and started spinning out hundreds of different versions of itself, multiplying its sides and multiplying in number. The mathematical definition of a prism is: “any solid having bases or ends that are parallel, congruent polygons, and sides that are parallelograms.” So a plinth, by definition is a prism but has been restricted all these years to having only four sides. In my work, as I said, they have been transformed to a more excessive state.

My thesis installation focuses around two central pieces, *Your Relentless Tenderness is our Prism Pivot Point*, and *Seized by the Power of a Great Affection*. The installation also includes a wall painting which transforms the space to feel like wall recedes and that the room is larger than it is, and one smaller sculpture titled, *Escaping from Beastly Blankness*.



Figure 46: *Your Relentless Tenderness is our Prism Pivot Point*, paper, acrylic, fabric, mixed media

Figure 47: *Your Relentless Tenderness is our Prism Pivot Point*, alternate view.





Figure 48: *Your Relentless Tenderness is our Prism Pivot Point*, detail

*Your Relentless Tenderness is our Prism Pivot Point* is a tall, stacked structure which sits on a pile of icy white and green prisms. The symbolism of unwavering benevolence of pure affection causes the surface of the structure to sprout thousands of little tails, covering it from front to top and cascading down its back to the floor in asymmetrical abundance. The twelve constructed paper stones centered on its front and back are symbolic for the Ephod and Breastplate that the Israelite priests wore in the innermost part of the Jewish Temple where the Ark of the Covenant was placed<sup>40</sup>. The breastplate the priest wore was inset with twelve stones, each stone inscribed with the name of one of the tribes of Israel. This object was a symbolic object, as one man wore it in order to represent the rest of the people of the nation before God. It is now believed that even the priest was symbolic for Jesus: one man going in the place of all the rest.

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<sup>40</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message // Remix: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. (Navpress, Colorado Springs, CO. 2003) 157-158. (*Exodus* 28: 6-30)



Figure 49: *Seized by the Power of a Great Affection*, paper, acrylic, plexi-glass, fabric, mixed media  
 Figure 50: *Seized by the Power of a Great Affection*, alternate view

The second major work is *Seized by the Power of a Great Affection*. This is a phrase from the deep south, used about 100 years ago when a person was describing an experience of a personal life-changing encounter with God's love.<sup>41</sup> The dimensions of the main structure in this piece are based on the proportions of the Ark of the Covenant, which was the chest that held symbolic tokens from the agreement between God and the Israelites to partner together and commit themselves to each other. This agreement was made and the Ark was built when the nation was wandering the desert, waiting to be brought into the 'Promised Land.'<sup>42</sup> I chose to use the Ark as the basis of this sculpture because it is one of the only icons of the Bible that has not been trivialized by pop culture--- even in the Indiana Jones movie, "Raiders of the Lost Ark", this ancient object still commands respect. I also find it relevant in light of the current conflict in the Middle East and the dispute

<sup>41</sup> Brennan Manning. The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus. (Fleming H. Revell, Grand Rapids, MI, 1986) 42.

between the Jewish people and Muslims for the dome of the rock where the Jewish temple once stood. It is believed that the Ark of the Covenant is still hidden somewhere in the hill, waiting for a time when the Jewish temple is rebuilt and the old customs of ritual and sacrifice are re-established. Most importantly however, the Ark is a symbolic of commitment, like a wedding band, for a people reconciled to God through faith.



Figure 51: *Seized by the Power of a Great Affection*, detail

Figure 52: *Seized by the Power of a Great Affection*, detail

This sculpture contains some of my first uses of transparency. The smaller white sculptures sit on neon pink plexi-glass, and seem to hover above the white carpet. I think that plastic, a flat monochromatic carrier of color functions similarly to the paper, and will become a more common element in future works. The back of the main structure alludes to architectural models of modern architecture, and the diorama on the interior, severe in it's emptiness like a Modernist home, contains a decadent little mini white sculpture next to a floor-to-ceiling blue window. This interior highlights the idea of the internal search for place in the same way that the external space is changed to create a feeling of place.

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<sup>42</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message // Remix: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. (Navpress, Colorado Springs, CO. 2003) 153-154. (Exodus 25: 10-22)



Figure 53: *Escaping from Beastly Blankness*, paper, wood, acrylic, corrugated plastic

I think these final works are successful in containing all of the concepts and aesthetic choices that have developed over the course of my graduate studies. They are simple and extravagant at the same time. They are physical objects which suggest the transcendent, the eternal, and the spiritual. They are feminine in sentiment, questioning the need for formal rigidity of masculine modernism, and challenging the frantic fragmentation and cynicism of postmodernism. Also, they are not stuck in everydayness, but are fantastical objects, working collectively to create a fantastical place. The feminine aesthetic that I've wrestled with the entire time has been strengthened with a more severe contrast of starkness and intensity of detail and color. The sculptures and wall painting are finally starting to work together in real, experiential space, but they also use illusional space to allude to the eternal, or otherworldly mindset than I feel connected to but which I am not always able to capture in the physical.

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## VITA

Lauren Clay was born in Brookhaven Mississippi, on August 17, 1982. Her family moved to Alpharetta GA, part of the suburbs of Atlanta when she was 4 years old. Her mother is an art teacher, and her father a photographer. She has one brother, a musician, sound artist, and sometimes sculptor.

Lauren attended Savannah College of Art and Design in south GA where she acquired her Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in Painting in 2004. She married Aaron Gerth in 2006 at the Rothko Chapel in Houston Texas. During her second year of graduate study, Lauren received the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Fellowship. She has exhibited at small venues throughout the United States. She finished her Master of Fine Arts Degree in Painting from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2007